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AUTHOR	Maeroff, Gene I.
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ABSTRACT

This brief examines the effects of media coverage of school violence on school violence. The news media take notice precisely because shootings in a school are unusual. The media did not take much notice of shootings in the 1980s and 1990s in inner city communities because these infractions were not judged to be anomalies; they did not measure up to the common definition of news, being exactly what some white journalists expected in minority communities. The effects of media coverage may be an increase in the fear of youth violence and the occurrence of copycat incidents. Violence portrayed in the electronic media can be particularly harmful because children connect more readily with visual images. The intensive coverage of a few high profile shootings may mislead the public into thinking that violence in the schools is pervasive. The media has a responsibility to keep events in perspective and to respect the privacy of students. Another aspect of the media's relationship with the schools stems from the zero tolerance policies meant to draw a line against violence at the school door. These well-intentioned policies have had some clumsy effects when schools are forced to apply a one-penalty-fits-all consequence that can make school officials look foolish. Schools should use good educational practice rather than Draconian punishments to persuade students to reject violence. (Contains 22 references.) (SLD)

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A Symbiosis of Sorts: School Violence and the Media

Choices Briefs Number 7, 2000

Gene I. Maeroff

Institute for Urban and Minority Education
Teachers College, Columbia University

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Choices Briefs

Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY

Number 7 2000

A SYMBIOSIS OF SORTS: SCHOOL VIOLENCE AND THE MEDIA

The names roll off the tongue like a litany of battlefields: Pearl, Mississippi; West Paducah, Kentucky; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Edinboro, Pennsylvania; Springfield, Oregon; and Littleton, Colorado. These places have been war zones of a sort, infamous sites of school violence that have captured headlines across the country and reaped hours of coverage on network television. The schools and the media sometimes seem locked in a symbiotic dance of death, making it difficult to think about school violence without taking note of its connection to the ever-present media.

What does this link between school violence and the media mean? How closely are the two really related? Is the criticism of the media for their possible role in fomenting violence reasonable? Or may it be a case of wanting to kill the messenger simply because the messenger is, both figuratively and literally, the reporter? This is, after all, a violent society and it has been since its earliest days. The U.S. is a country where guns often can be bought over the counter as easily as toaster ovens, where films are replete with images of death, and where violent video games capture the time and attention of legions of pubescent males.

Within the schools, bullying, misogyny, gay bashing, and outright attacks on students, and even teachers, have been regular features. Some students find models for their violent acts among their own parents. In Brooklyn's East New York section, on the last day of school in June 1999, an elementary school student dissatisfied with the grades her teacher had marked on her report card ran home to complain to her mother. Daughter and mother returned to school and, together, assaulted the teacher, who suffered contusions, scratches, and bruises to the head, face, hands, and arm. A judge sent the mother to jail for 60 days and put her on probation for three years.

Lest anyone think this is a purely American phenomenon, it is worth noting that a wave of violence in French schools during Winter 1999-2000 led to school closings as teachers and parents protested the rising level of violence among students. And we can hardly forget the gunman at the school in Dunblane, Scotland, who killed 16 students and a teacher in 1996. But it should surprise no one that schools—in the United States or almost anywhere else—and the areas surrounding them are occasionally sites of violent acts involving children. This is where young people congregate; this is where their perceived grievances are apt to be manifest.

The news media take notice precisely because shootings in school are unusual. News comprises aberrations. Most schools most of the time are, in fact, safe places. The exceptions make the news, as they do in all areas of human endeavor. Is it reasonable, then, to expect the news media to ignore or even downplay violence when it occurs in schools? The very fact that schools are supposed to be safe havens makes violent acts newsworthy. There is the ever-present aim of the media to explain the inexplicable, to make sense of the irrational. The media have always been attracted to oddities and mysteries. So what can be more odd and mysterious than adolescents shooting down their classmates! In the suburbs—the white suburbs, no less.

The Media's Record

Selective Coverage

Where were the media during the 1980s and the 1990s when African American and Latino youngsters were toting guns and shooting each other—in schools, near schools, on the way to and from schools, and during drive-by shootings in the 'hood? The tacit answer is that little heed was paid by the media because these infractions did not measure up to the common definition of news. They were not judged to be anomalies. The incidents, after all, were what some white journalists expected in minority neighborhoods. And so we search in vain through news columns and videotapes of newscasts for more than the occasional in-depth report on children killing each other in and out of schools in Anacostia, in East LA, in Bed-Stuy, and in Roxbury. Just in the first half of the 1999-2000 school year alone, some dozen and a half school-aged children were killed—away from schools—in the District of Columbia, with hardly a mention in the news media outside Washington.

To some degree, this has been the media's historic approach in reporting on crime generally: violence in minority communities has not received the amount of coverage that the same incident gets if it occurs in affluent white neighborhoods. "What's ironic to me, and especially to many of my black students, is that Columbine and the major incidents of school violence that have sparked the recent national concern over safety were perpetrated by white kids," wrote Patrick Welsh (2000), an English teacher at T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Virginia. "To black students, the refrain 'We believed it couldn't happen here' coming from Columbine and other communities was code for 'We didn't think white kids could do a thing like this.'"

And so it is that school violence in places where the media least expect it, in predominantly white suburbs and

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bucolic rural locales, has been a magnet to reporters. There may be no end to the milking of what journalists regard as a "good" story. Newspapers and television outlets seek what is known in the trade as a "news peg"—a justification on which a story can be hung—even long after the event itself. Anniversaries of news events, including those involving school violence, become occasions for revisiting the story. Officials at Columbine High School, keenly aware that this would happen on April 20, 2000, exactly one year after the shootings, even scheduled news briefings in the weeks leading up to the anniversary to help the reporters prepare their stories.

Effects of Coverage

What effect does this media coverage actually have? Does it incite others to violence, creating so-called copycat incidents? Do incidents increase in the wake of coverage? Would the seventh-grader who shot and killed his teacher in Lake Worth, Florida, on the last day of school in May 2000 have done so if the earlier murders at Columbine and violence by students in other locales had been downplayed by the media? One can hardly give a definitive answer to such questions. A recent report maintains that public fears about youth violence have been mounting even as evidence accumulates that such incidents have been decreasing; school-associated violent deaths decreased from 43 in 1998 to 26 in 1999, including the shootings at Columbine (Schiraldi & Ziedenberg, 2000).

Fear of Youth Violence. Nonetheless, the portion of Americans who believed that a shooting was likely in their neighborhood school rose from 49 percent to 70 percent during the same one-year period (Brooks, Schiraldi, & Ziedenberg, 2000), perhaps indicating that the media help stir fears by focusing on the relatively few fatal incidents inside school buildings. Consider the difference between the perceptions of teachers and the general public when it comes to school safety. Only 24 percent of the public describe the learning environment for children in schools as "very safe and orderly," while 43 percent of teachers—the adults who are in those classrooms every day and rely least on the accounts of the media—deem the classrooms very safe and orderly (Langdon & Vesper, 2000).

Perhaps the problem, in part, rests with the disproportionate amount of coverage that criminal incidents of any kind tend to receive when juveniles are involved, leading people to think that youth violence is ubiquitous. Kathryn C. Montgomery of the Center for Media Education, speaking at a 2000 seminar of Teacher College's Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media, estimated that two-thirds of the coverage of crime by the media deals with acts by juveniles despite the fact that they are responsible for only one-third of the crime. Furthermore, less than 1 percent of homicides among 12- to 19-year-olds occur in schools, and 90 percent of the schools in the United States report no violent crimes (*Fast Facts About School Violence*, 1999). This is clearly a nation that fears its young, and the media must bear some measure of blame for that sad situation.

Copycat Incidents. On the other hand, though young people may not be inclined to shoot their classmates as a result of seeing an account of their peers doing so, they may take other, less egregious, actions. For example, they may be inspired by the coverage of youth violence to call in bomb threats in an effort to disrupt schools and wield some power. In fact, bomb scares have become so prevalent that states around the country are enacting legislation aimed at perpetrators, according to *Education Week* (Blair, 2000). Penalties include suspension of drivers' licenses, expulsion from school, and damage payments assessed against parents.

What are the media to do? The media's apparent policy is not to report all bomb scares, though this might be because editors consider such incidents as unnewsworthy (unless a bomb is discovered), not because they want to limit copycat acts. But, in the wake of actual violent incidents, this policy becomes more difficult to follow. "Our policy on bomb threats used to be that we just didn't report on them," said Jennifer Brett, a reporter for the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. "We felt it would just encourage the practice. But then the Heritage High School shooting happened [in Conyers, Georgia, where six students were shot] and for a while after that anything would really raise a red flag and we'd go racing. Since then, our policy has been back to what it was before: we try to assess on a case-by-case basis" (Hechinger Institute, 2000).

Violence Reporting by the Visual Media

Debates over journalistic treatment of school violence should distinguish between portrayals in print and those on television. The difference has to do with the different natures of the two media. Television provides an immediacy that print can seldom duplicate. Television is graphic, in your face; print is easier to ignore. The upshot is that violence in the electronic media can be particularly harmful because children more readily connect with visual images (Koziey, 1996). Watching this sort of action appears to desensitize the young and lead to aggressive behavior (Levine, 1996; Simmons, Stalsworth, & Wentzel, 1999). Yet, while aggression may be triggered in some children, these tendencies may already be present in them and not be a result of their television-watching (Primavera, Herron, & Jauier, 1996). The young people inclined to watch the most violent fare may be those who already are most predisposed to violence. As an analogue, the students who do worst in school tend to watch the most television, but this is not to say that there is a cause and effect. It cannot be declared definitively that violence in the media begets violence in the larger society and in schools in particular.

Television news predicates much of its approach on retaining viewers. The implications for newscasts are appalling. Television news directors and reporters feel compelled to present information in short, punchy takes; there is little time for elucidation. Depictions of violence lend themselves to this practice, with outlets such as Court TV, a cable network, using footage of actual crimes as a source of entertainment. Jim Squires (1998), a veteran political reporter and a former editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, maintains that the broadcast industry has surrendered to the entertainment industry, and that news in the visual media is valued not for its inherent importance or public service "but for its ability to attract an audience and turn a profit." And there is evidence that children are frightened when violence figures in the news (Cantor & Nathanson, 1996). None of this is to say that television is not capable of distinguished journalism or that the medium is inherently inferior to print. In dissecting the coverage of the school shootings in Jonesboro, Ed Turner (1998) concluded that television "scored few major hits, but it didn't commit aay major blunders. The nightly newscasts were thorough, if lacking real depth..."

Coverage of a topic as sensitive and subtle as violence in schools cannot fare well in the ratings-oriented climate in

which commercial television operates. This was illustrated in San Antonio when a local television station broke a story about a possible shooting at an elementary school at 8:27 one Fall morning in 1999. A rival television station followed five minutes later with its own version of the story and that station's radio counterpart interrupted its morning broadcast with a report on the events. Viewers and listeners of these broadcast outlets heard about shots fired and people wounded. But nothing had happened at the school; there had been gunshots fired on a highway miles away from the school (Pompilio, 2000).

Violence as Entertainment in the Media

Violence is rampant in media entertainment that makes no pretense of being journalism, though it is unclear whether such fare is so readily available because people want it or whether people turn to it because it is so easy to obtain. Television programs, movies, video games, and even pop music (such as the lyrics of some rap songs) seem not to hesitate to depict violence. A universe of Arnold Schwarzeneggers and Jean Claude Van Dammes provides models for the nation's testosterone-driven young males. Nonetheless, entertainment industry executives do not readily accept blame for youth violence. In advance of a meeting at the White House that President Bill Clinton convened to address the causes of violence by teenagers, David Geffen, one of the founders of Dreamworks SKG film studio, said that people may as well blame libraries for youth violence: "They're full of violent books," he said (Broder, 1999).

Video games are now ubiquitous and adults who take the time to view them are shocked by the horrific content of some. One of the newest games, *Soldier of Fortune*, not only allows a player, for just $45.99, to shoot and kill an enemy but to inflict all sorts of gradations of injury, from shooting off arms, to putting bullets into the enemy's throat, to putting a bullet in the "right" place in the stomach to make the guts exude (Olafson, 2000). Lawyers have gone so far as to plead some youthful perpetrators of violence innocent on the basis that they were corrupted by watching videos and other violent media.

But Henry Jenkins, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said that critics have produced little compelling evidence to suggest that video game violence leads directly to real-world violence and that "much of the evidence that they do present has been exaggerated and simplified" (Gillespie & d'Igital, 2000, p. 20). An author writing in *Phi Delta Kappan* came to a similar conclusion, though with a different twist that put more of the responsibility in the laps of parents: "[W]e don't have a problem with violent video games or with the children who play them. We do have a problem with parents who don't seem to be concerned, who continue to buy or let their children buy violent video games, and who then never supervise their children's often excessive playing of video games..." (Van Horn, 1999).

Media Responsibility on the Coverage of Violence

Intensive coverage of a few high-profile shootings may mislead the public to think that violence in schools is pervasive. The media should not explode small occurrences into major incidents; when the occasional major incident *does* occur it should be kept in perspective—not portrayed as the norm. Furthermore, the media should respect privacy to the degree possible and not trample on the rights of minors in ways that threaten to destroy their psyches and even their lives. The National Education Association (NEA, n.d.), in the wake of the Columbine shootings, issued the following admonition in an "open letter" to the news media: "...Although reporters have a very important job in gathering information from the scene, we have learned that interviews with students immediately following a crisis can cause unintended damage. The first person a student should talk to following a tragedy...is a counselor, not a reporter." In a separate document, the NEA (2000) listed ten steps for newspeople, including requests to avoid a repetition of violent images that provide "a false impression of schools" and to avoid focusing on "lurid details and motivations of perpetrators."

The *Chicago Sun-Times* attracted attention when it refused to put news of the shootings, first at Springfield, and then at Columbine, on its front page. Both stories were relegated to inside pages. The paper's editor, Nigel Wade, justified his decision on the basis that children were involved and the situations were delicate. While critics might wish that more news organizations exercised similar restraint, it is unlikely that many will emulate this approach. Most editors say that the reporting of events that are by their nature sensational should not be confused with sensationalism. Just the fact that there was extensive and thorough reporting on the Columbine tragedy, for example, does not necessarily indicate a shortcoming on the part of the press. The *Denver Post* won a Pulitzer Prize—journalism's most prestigious award—for its coverage of the events at Columbine. The newspaper said it considered the recognition an acknowledgment that it had behaved in a compassionate and responsible way.

Another aspect of the media's relationship with schools stems from the zero tolerance policies that are meant to draw a line against violence at the schoolhouse door. These well-intentioned policies have sparked some very clumsy results—often reported by the media—when schools are forced to apply a one-penalty-fits-all consequence even to the least provocation. The result can be a media circus—almost on the level of the media's response to actual acts of violence—as television stations and newspapers focus on some of the most egregious enforcement practices, making school officials look petty and foolish. In Sayreville, New Jersey, for instance, four kindergartners were suspended for three days after a playground incident in which fingers were pointed as make-believe guns and threats were apparently exchanged. In Larchmont, New York, an 11-year-old was suspended for reciting a poem to several girls on the playground: "Roses are red, violets are black. Your chest is as flat as your back." Perhaps a wiser course, assert Curwin and Mendler (1999), might be a middle path that threads its way between being firm and being fair.

Schools, being the educational institutions that they are, should strive to use good educational practice rather than Draconian punishments to persuade students to eschew violence. They should do so not because of the threat of embarrassment in the media, but simply because it is good policy. A goal, as Hyman and Snook (2000) point out, should be the creation of educational models to reduce school violence rather than enforcement models. This can mean paying closer attention to the school climate, practicing more democracy within schools, equipping students with conflict resolution skills, and using peer mediation. Will such measures inoculate schools against violence? Not likely, but they may diminish the potential for violence and lessen the need for policies that lead to embarrassment in the media.

- Finally, in the era of new technology, it is necessary to take account of an unsettling trend in the reporting of school

violence. The rush to be first with a story seemed to end with the demise of newspaper competition, but the Internet may reinvigorate the urge. News is now available every second of every day from every corner of the country, not to mention the world. Newspapers increasingly update the news on their web sites at frequent intervals as they vie with distant rivals they encounter only on the Internet. There may be a fresh surge of competition as news organizations race to break stories on their web sites—particularly when the well-being of children inside school buildings is threatened. Add this new twist to the continuing competition among the many broadcasters in each locale, and incidents of school violence in the future could be reported potentially in even more troubling fashion than before. These changes in news reporting come at a time when young Americans, those under 30, increasingly do not read print editions of newspapers and may not even watch news shows on television, preferring to get their news—if they care about it at all—from the Internet.

—Gene I. Maeroff,
Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media,
Teachers College, Columbia University

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Choices in Preventing Youth Violence, Erwin Flaxman, Director, Teachers College, Box 228, Columbia University, 525 West 120th Street, New York, NY 10027, 212/678-3158.